

Forced to be Special

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Forced to be Special

Contemporary Issues Paper

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Where We Stand

For the past five years, there has been heated discussion over whether or not the United States' Marine Corps will integrate a portion of its forces into the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM). On 1 November 2005 United States Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld announced the creation of a force of approximately 2,600 highly specialized Marines selected to join SOCOM as part of the elite troops available for counterterrorist operations and other missions requiring exceptional skills.¹

The integration of Marines into SOCOM presents the possibility that the Marine Corps will face a possible denigration of the histories, traditions, and cultures that make The Corps unique from every other military force worldwide. In order to avoid losing their identity the Marine Corps and SOCOM leadership need to have a plan to bridge the gap between the these two very distinct organizations. The solution should be focused in an effort to ensure that the Marines still maintain their long-standing culture within an organization that has built its own distinctiveness.

As the Marine Corps prepares for this integration, will it prepare for a possible decline in the traditional ethos that sets Marines apart from other services?

¹ Department of Defense website, www.defenselink.mil.

Paving the way as pioneers in war fighting, the Marine Corps has prided itself on its autonomy and self-sufficiency in contrast to other military services. However, with the integration of Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) into SOCOM, this exclusive bragging right is soon to change. In a recent issue of the *Washington Post*, Bradley Graham wrote, "...departure for the fiercely self-reliant Corps, the new contingent will report not to the Marine leadership but to the multi-service command responsible for other Special Operations troops."² It is evident from this statement the Marine Corps is about to travel into uncharted territory. With a large degree of control taken away from the Marine Corps over these forces, it is feared that a "non-Marine" image may take hold of MARSOC Marines without the direct supervision by the Marine Corps.

Opposing Sides

There have been arguments both for and against the integration of Marine Corps assets into the special operations command. SOCOM's mission is to lead, plan, synchronize, and as directed, execute global operations against terrorist networks. USSOCOM trains, organizes, equips and deploys combat ready special operations forces to combatant commands.³

² Shortfalls of Special Operations Command Are Cited By Bradley Graham Washington Post Staff Writer Thursday, November 17, 2005; Page A02

³ United States Special Operations Command, website, www.socom.mil

Arguments for integration include views that the Marine Corps has not been making full use of its capabilities and that SOCOM will be able to acquire increased funding for Marine units to receive increased specialized training, while also providing a more active role in counterterrorism operations around the globe. Although these are viable and reasonable positions for the integration, opponents of the integration argue that the Marine Corps will sacrifice individuality, autonomy, and will see a significant degradation in their non-commissioned officer ranks.

One aspect that seems to have been glossed over by those who argue for integration is that for the past two hundred and thirty years the Marine Corps has been the dominant U.S. military force. The entire Marine Corps have always been viewed as a special force.

Marines have set the standards for excellence, cohesion, professionalism, and the production of successful war fighters who can attack rapidly in an expeditionary environment. The high standards that the Marine Corps has set for itself over the course of its distinguished campaign record and battlefield successes, The Corps has created a model for other military organizations to emulate without question. When MARSOC joins SOCOM it will essentially have to play by a new set of rules directed from SOCOM command.

Marines Set the Bar

Special operations (SPECOPS) units are capable of conducting operations in remote areas and hostile environments for extended periods with minimal external direction and support. SOCOM also has the capability to develop, organize, equip, train, and advise or direct indigenous forces up to battalion size in special operations. But it is the Marine Corps who pioneered these skills on a much larger scale.

In today's operating environment, one can argue also that most, if not all, active duty and reserve conventional military units, especially the United States Marine Corps, have been and are currently conducting these same missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and abroad. Illustrated in relation to special operations forces in an article in the *Washington Post*, *"You have some of our real elite units doing some lesser-type missions, and then you have some units that should be doing more training doing direct-action," said a military officer at the Pentagon who has reviewed SOCOM's performance and requirements. "So it's a real issue of focus."*⁴ This only verifies the fact the in today's current operating environment, SOCOM forces are conducting missions normally assigned to conventional units, most notably the Marine Corps which has seen themselves as a highly capable force.

⁴ Elite Marine Unit to Help Fight Terrorist Force to Be Part of Special Operations By Bradley Graham Washington Post Staff Writer Wednesday, November 2, 2005; A14

However, the Marine Corps has developed the capacity to conduct special operations for decades, ranging from the Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable) (MEUSOC) and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) to limited direct action (DA) missions or re-capture missions, enhanced maritime interdiction operations (EMIO) and maritime vessel search and seizure missions (VBSS). Units with these capabilities have typically been included in the Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable)(MEUSOC), Force Reconnaissance, or Fleet Antiterrorism Security Teams (FAST) that regularly deploy around the world on short notice.

The fact is that these units are not considered "special forces", but moreover, "specially trained forces" that do not limit themselves to an individual mission exclusively. This is one more example of how the Marine Corps has demonstrated that they are capable of conducting special operations from a stand-alone perspective.

Operational Realities

Although these conventional units may not possess the level of specialized training that special operations units receive in some areas, these same conventional units are enjoying the same benefits by proving themselves capable in conducting special operations. This is not to suggest that the United States

military does not have a need for SOCOM as the Global War on Terrorism continues, but to illuminate the point that given a mission and training, conventional infantry and support units within the military are very capable and adaptive, which allows them to achieve success under most circumstances in combat. What has been seen since the onset of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom is a progressive bleed-over of what each component is capable of and which organization will be given the mission task based on the availability of forces.

The United States Marine Corps has demonstrated this capability over the past several conflicts. For example in Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada and onto Lebanon, Operation Preying Mantis in the Persian Gulf on oil platforms, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. By integrating into the special operations community Marines risk giving up one intrinsic trait they possess and that is unlike other military services there is a predominant reason why young men and women join the Marine Corps -- to become Marines.

The young men and women who join the Marine Corps do not join to become Rangers, they do not join to become Seals, or Para Jumpers, or Airborne -- they join to become Marines. Even within the aviation community of the Marine Corps the resounding rationale to join is not to become pilots, but to become Marines.

Heading Down an Unknown Road

Lt. Gen. Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller said, *"Our Country won't go on forever, if we stay soft as we are now. There won't be any America because some foreign soldier will invade us and take our women and breed a hardier race!"* This undying quote can be applied on a smaller scale to reflect the issue of the Marine Corps' integration into SOCOM as well. The worry is that by allowing outside influences to take root within the Marine Corps it may cease to be what it is.

If SOCOM gets 2,600 Marines today, how many will they want in the future, and where will that leave the rest of the Marine Corps? It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Marine Corps may in fact wind up losing some job security after this transition takes place.

Imagine a balancing scale. MARSOC does not have Marine aviation allocated into its plan. It does not have a large support network factored in. It does not have a large size infantry component (like the US Army Rangers). Once this is realized and the need becomes greater SOCOM and MARSOC will have to start tapping into more Marines from the existing forces. If this occurs and MARSOC begins to mirror what the Marine Corps is already it could be argued that there will no longer a need for the Marine Corps as a separate service to conduct the unique functions that SOCOM will possess.

The question now is how the Marine Corps, and more specifically, MARSOC prepare for a possible cultural shift, or cultural loss for that matter, when it integrates twenty-six hundred Marines into the SOCOM. Can a twenty-six hundred-member unit hold onto the history, traditions, and legacies that have made the Marine Corps? Arguably, the Marine Corps would like to think that its reputation and lineage of independence is untouchable by outside elements and that it will endure this new transition into SOCOM without incident.

In a personal interview with Master Sergeant Daniel Furiak, who has spent extensive time with Marine Detachment One (MARDET-1), the SOCOM test-bed for the Marine integration, stated, *"...everyone already wants to be like the Marine Corps as it stands now...that's the difference between what [we] have as Marines, young boys who join the military to fight and be challenged...that is why they join the Marine Corps."*⁵

During the interview, Master Sergeant Furiak also emphasized the point that, *"...the one main factor that sets Marines apart from special forces is the fact that they have the internal discipline already instilled into them from the beginning...it doesn't have to be learned and this is why the Marines are such a special breed."*

It may be safe to assume that the initial wave of the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) will pass on these

⁵Personal interview with MSgt Daniel Furiak, USMC.

traditions. However, it is also possible that they will become too enamored with the SOCOM aura and separate themselves from what they have been ingrained with since entry-level training.

Satisfaction from Within

The Marine Corps has and will continue to conduct operations of a specialized nature. They have been doing it for two hundred and thirty years now, vice the fifteen years of SOCOM experience. History has demonstrated that the Marines have had the capability, flexibility, and determination to set the standard in all areas of the military. They will continue to do so if the Defense Secretary and the Marine Corps can concede to the fact that they do not have to be called "special forces" for the sake of sounding sexier or appearing more elite. For most, it is enough just to be called Marine.

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